

BDSM & Survivor Healing

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By Katy

I think, first off, it is important for me to be open and say that BDSM is not something that I am an expert in, or even something that I know a whole lot about. I researched this subject as I was interested in why so many survivors seem to participate in the BDSM scene - and why so many survivors claim that BDSM is "healing" for them. Therefore, I apologise if some of the terminology I use is incorrect, but this article stems from a review of the information I could find on BDSM and healing rather than any personal knowledge. Please also note that this review is not intended to be a conclusive report on BDSM, but instead is intended to highlight some of the ways that BDSM can be deemed therapeutic for survivors if conducted within a safe, respectful and loving relationship.

What is BDSM?

BDSM is derived from the terms bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism and masochism. In very simple terms, BDSM is a type of lifestyle that individuals choose to participate in where power (and sometimes pain) are utilized to create pleasure, tension and release. In a typical relationship there will be a "Dom" (Dominant) and a "Sub" (Submissive) who will consent to engage in an openly acknowledged power game. A survivor may adopt either the Dom or Sub role - and many testify that both roles can be therapeutic.

Control and reclaiming power

Obviously, as survivors, we have experienced situations during our lives where we have had control taken away from us by someone wielding more power at that time - and then they have abused this power and hurt us in ways that no one should ever experience. When survivors take on the submissive player in the partnership, on the surface, it could be argued that they are recreating the abusive experience by having the power taken away from them and being subjected to pain, humiliation, violence etc. - which could obviously be re-traumatizing. However, in a properly controlled BDSM relationship, the submissive does have most of the power because they are the ones who are involved in stating beforehand what is permissible, how far it is okay for the Dom to go, and when to use the "safe word" to stop any further action. Where there is a properly established understanding and trust

between the Sub and the Dom, the Sub is able to recreate being submissive, but in a situation where they remain safe and in control of what does and does not happen to them. Therefore, it goes without saying, that for a survivor of sexual violence, having this type of control in a sexual / intimate situation can potentially be empowering and therefore ultimately healing because they are essentially re-writing the script. Similarly, some survivors adopt the dominant role as a means to feeling that they are now in control.

Pleasure and Pain

It goes without saying that many survivors also experience difficulty when engaged in intimate activities which result in sensual / sexual pleasure. Some of us feel guilty for feeling aroused....feeling it is somehow wrong or dirty. Others of us experience heightened flashbacks or body memories when aroused. Others of us simply find we cannot become aroused - or avoid intimate situations altogether because we cannot deal with the feelings it may throw up in us. Some survivors involved in BDSM disclose that they have found the use of pain to help them experience sexual pleasure which is non-triggering and safe.

It is important to recognise that there is also a very strong link between pleasure and pain - as pain stimulates the release of endorphins and adrenaline - which together can combine to both stimulate the body and create a sense of euphoria. BDSM often involves the use of pain alongside sexual stimulation, and therefore some survivors have stated that the feel-good feelings that follow the infliction of pain and then these feel-good feelings being associated with sex, has allowed them to reprogram their brains into accepting that sex can be a pleasurable experience.

Some survivors who participate in BDSM have stated that physical pain within this relationship can help them to remain focussed on the present situation without being triggered into experiencing flashbacks, body memories, or negative memories associated with sex / sensuality - or switching off and becoming passive. They report that the pain allows them to stay in the here and now or "in the zone" - and therefore to experience arousal without experiencing any of the negative connotations connected to that sensation from their experiences in the past.

However, worryingly, some survivors do report that they use physical pain in order to punish themselves for feeling aroused. Obviously, using pain in such a punitive way is unlikely to be healing and may ultimately result in retraumatising the survivor.

Expressing anger

Another potentially healing aspect associated with BDSM is the ability to express repressed anger in a safe way. During abuse / sexual assault, many of us were put into situations where we were not able to express how we felt about what was being done to us. Many of us have expressed regret because we've felt that we did not fight hard enough, or that we did not show how angry we were at being violated - because it wasn't safe to do so. I know that I, for one, at the time of the abuse, would "switch off" and disengage as much as possible - and so the anger was repressed and lay dormant for a considerable time. In a correctly controlled BDSM relationship, the Sub again can find themselves in a situation where they are being dominated - but this time, they may be able to express their anger at what is happening to them.....and therefore releasing some of that repressed anger. In this respect, this situation can also result in a re-writing of the script and help us to re-establish control. Essentially, this situation can allow the survivor to express their anger in a situation where they deem it to be permissible and understandable - as well as ensuring there is someone there that can bear witness to their anger so that it is no longer hidden from everyone. In this respect, expression of this pent up anger about what was done to us can help us to break the silence which many of us have found ourselves trapped in. The opportunity to express and release anger can be a very cathartic experience and can free us up to deal with some of the other issues that the abuse /assault legacy has left us with.

Establishing trust

Obviously, for most survivors, our sense of trust has been desecrated and, particularly in intimate relationships, we can struggle with establishing trust and a sense of safety. A successful BDSM relationship is built on the concept of trust and on the mantra of "Safety, Consensuality and Mutuality" - and therefore, for survivors, being embroiled in a relationship where these concepts are highly respected can be a positive experience. In a safe and loving BDSM relationship, partners talk about guidelines and rules regarding their sexual play in a way that many people in non-BDSM relationships do not. For example, BDSM partners are more likely (because of the nature of their relationship) to talk about what the limits of their play are - and to establish a "safe word" which will immediately stop any further play. Survivors can find it therapeutic to be involved in a relationship that has such rigid guidelines as, as long as these guidelines and rules are adhered to, it can lead to an increased sense of trust between partners, as well as an increased sense of trust in themselves and the world around them.

Body ownership and identity

Lastly, some survivors within the BDSM community, choose to adorn their body with piercings and tattoos etc. - and this has very much become an image associated within the overt BDSM community. Many of these survivors talk about how these adornments increase their sense of personal ownership of their body because they are choosing what to do to it and when. Some have reported that, in particular, genital piercings can help them feel that their genitals now belong only to themselves, and that feeling a piercing can allow them to feel some sort of connection with these body areas, rather than a general dissociation. Obviously, sexual abuse and assault can result in the feeling that our body has been violated, and certainly in cases where abuse is over a long time, we can actually feel that our body doesn't infact belong to us anymore! Therefore, any action which helps us to feel that our body is ours and ours alone, can be a very therapeutic and positive experience.

Obviously, like any sexual relationship, BDSM relationships can be subject to abuse. To understand the differences between a safe, consensual BDSM relationship and an abusive relationship, please see here:

[Warning signs of an abusive personality.](#)

[Am I being abused?](#)

[Safety plan.](#)

[BDSM Lifestyle and Domestic Violence](#)

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